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ABSTRACT

To explore how respondent gender, influencer status, relationship closeness, and directness of a request affect compliance and resistance strategies, undergraduates (N=116) role-played responses to a professor's request. The status of the requester was higher than that of the resister, but the relative status of the requester was varied systematically. Closeness also was varied systematically. Students listened to tape recordings of a male professor asking a student to do one of five things: declare a major in his department, help him with research, help a colleague with research, take a course in his discipline, or go to an evening lecture on a topic in his discipline. Tapes varied by closeness of the student to the professor, whether the request was direct or indirect, and the professor's relative status on the faculty. Respondents role-played their response to the request. Compliance was greatest in the closest relationship and lowest in the medium close relationship. Status of the professor, relationship closeness, and request directness did not affect refusal strategies, but respondent status and gender did. Women were more likely to say they would refuse by telling the truth than were men, whereas men were more likely to describe other strategies. Thus, the nature of a relationship and respondent gender affected whether and how one refused requests. (Author/NB)

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Just Saying "No" to a Professor: The Effects of Respondent Gender, Relationship Closeness, and Faculty Status.

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Just Saying "No" to a Professor: The Effects of Respondent Gender, Relationship Closeness, and Faculty Status.

Abstract

To explore how respondent gender, influencer status, relationship closeness, and directness of a request affect compliance and resistance strategies, undergraduates role-played responses to a professor's request. Compliance was greatest in the closest relationship and lowest in the medium close relationship. Status of the professor, relationship closeness, and request directness did not affect refusal strategies, but respondent status and gender did. Women were more likely to say they would refuse telling the truth than men, whereas men were more likely to describe other strategies. Thus, the nature of a relationship and respondent gender affect whether and how one refuses requests.

Just Saying "No" to a Professor: The Effects of Respondent Gender, Relationship Closeness, and Faculty Status.

Research on strategies to influence others, conformity, and compliance with requests demonstrates that status and gender affect strategy choice and compliance rates (e.g., Asch, 1956; Cowan, Drinkard, & Macgavin, 1984; Howard, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1986; Milgram, 1974; Offermann & Kearney, 1988). However, little research examines strategies to resist requests except in particular circumstances, such as sexual advances (Belk & Snell, 1988; Brady et al., 1991; Byers, 1988; Wagner, 1988).

Kahn et al. (1990) explored how gender, status, and intimacy affect resistance strategies. Undergraduate respondents believed that people with lower status avoid influence by telling a lie, while peers and high status people avoid influence by giving the true reason for refusal. Respondents said a person would refuse telling the truth with strangers more than with friends and roommates. Refusing with the truth and with a lie were given equally in coworker relationships. Sex of respondent, resister, or

influencer did not influence avoidance strategy choices. With adult continuing education students, Madden and Kahn (1992) replicated these findings, except that there was a significant effect of respondent sex, in that women were more likely to say they would refuse with a true reason.

The present study was designed to extend the findings of the previous two studies to a different kind of relationship, that between a faculty member and a student. The status of the requester was higher than that of the resister, but the relative status of the requester was varied systematically. Unlike the previous research, closeness was varied systematically. A new variable, whether the request was direct or indirect, was also added to see if the way in which a request was made affected compliance or refusal strategies.

Method

Each respondent listened to a brief tape recording of a male professor asking a student to do one of five things: declare a major in his department, help him with some research, help a colleague with some research, take a course in his discipline, or go to an evening lecture on a topic in his discipline. For each

scenario, the tape was introduced by another voice which described the situation of the meeting and established the conditions of the scenario, including the closeness of the student to the professor (high, medium, or low), whether the request was a direct request or an indirect suggestion, and the professor's relative status on the faculty (high vs. low). Thus, there were 60 scenarios, counterbalancing all combinations of the independent variables across the five situations. Each respondent heard only one scenario.

Respondents then role-played their response to the request; the response was recorded on a second tape recorder. Responses were transcribed and coders unaware of which scenario had elicited each response coded it using the scheme developed by Kahn et al. (1990). Each response was coded by three coders and at least two out of three coders agreed in 93 percent of the cases. The remaining cases were considered uncodable and eliminated from subsequent analyses.

Results

Respondents were 76 (65.5%) female and 40 (34.5%) male college undergraduates. 11.2 percent were freshmen, 23.4 percent were sophomores, 37.9 percent

were juniors, and 26.7 percent were seniors.

Compliance

Overall, 17.2 percent of respondents said they would comply with the professor's request. 31.9 percent said they would refuse with the truth, 18.1 said they would refuse with an excuse, 6.9 said they would refuse with no reason, and 6.9 percent said they would bargain or compromise.

Insert Table 1 about here

Compliance varied with closeness of the relationship; compliance was greatest in the closest relationship (28.2% complied), next in the least close relationship (18.4%) and lowest in the medium close relationship (5.1%; X (2, n=116) = 7.33, $p < .05$).

Compliance rates did not differ by respondent gender, status of the faculty member, or directness of the request. Interactions between status, closeness, and directness and gender regarding compliance were not significant.

Refusal Strategies

Among those who did not comply, refusal strategies did not differ with status of the faculty member,

closeness of the relationship, or directness of the request. Refusal strategies did differ by respondent gender, in that women were most likely to say they would refuse telling the truth (51.7% vs. 20.7%), whereas men were more likely to describe some other strategies [37.9% vs. 6.7%; X (4, n=89), p < .01]. Interactions between status, closeness, and directness and gender by response were not significant.

Insert Table 2 about here

Refusal strategy varied with the class standing of respondents, an indicator of the students' relative status. Freshmen were most likely to report using various "other" strategies; sophomores and juniors were most likely to report refusing with the truth, and seniors were approximately equally likely to report using refuse with the truth or refuse with an excuse (X (12, n=88) = 24.0, p < .05). Refusal strategies did not differ by respondents' major or whether they had declared a major or were transfer students.

Insert Table 3 about here

Discussion

That giving the true reason for refusing was the most common strategy with these requesters contradicts the findings of Kahn et al. (1990) that refusing with the truth was most common with strangers, but not acquaintances. Thus, in these scenarios, resisters knew requesters to varying degrees and respondents were not inclined to lie to resist a request. Resistance strategies used in varying types of relationships require further study.

In the present study, refusers were all lower status than the requesters, and the relative status of the requesting professor did not matter. The relative status of the student resister did affect the refusal strategy chosen; the higher status senior students tended to say they would resist with the truth or an excuse more than freshmen, who said they would try a variety of other resistance techniques. Freshmen's use of "other" strategies suggests that, as a group, there is little consensus as to how to handle this situation. Freshmen may be less certain about how they would respond because they have not had many similar experiences in college. That seniors were more likely than sophomores and juniors to use an excuse rather

than bargaining or giving no reason may be because they have developed and come to value relationships with faculty members, a common occurrence in this particular small college sample. Therefore, seniors may be more cautious about jeopardizing a relationship than other students. Sophomores and juniors have enough status and experience to be honest and less to lose by being undiplomatically so.

The finding that women were more likely to say they would resist by telling the truth is consistent with the finding of Madden and Kahn (1992). Although clearly more research is needed, these two studies imply that women use more forthright refusal strategies than men. Perhaps women value honesty in relationships more than men and therefore are willing to be honest even if it is not always to their advantage. Madden and Kahn (1992) found that refusing with a lie was seen as most effective. (That study did not distinguish between refusing with a lie and refusing with an excuse, so excuses were coded as lies.) Are women more honest then men, even if lying might be more effective and safer? Stereotypes might suggest that women feel less comfortable manipulating people for their own gain or might value honest relationships more than men, but

one should be cautious about generalizing to other situations without further study.

Refusal strategies were not affected by the other independent variables in the study, the closeness of the relationship between student and professor, and the directness of the request. However, relationship closeness did influence rates of compliance. Perhaps compliance was greatest in the closest relationship because people value the approval of someone with whom they feel close or feel that a favor would be reciprocated later in the relationship. Compliance was next most likely in the least close relationships, either because one does not know what strategies are effective with someone one doesn't know well or because requests are unexpected and therefore taken more seriously.

This research describes what students think they would do in this particular situation. Two avenues for further research are evident. First, one would want to know why people choose the strategies they report. Do they perform a kind of cost-benefit analysis, looking at which strategies are likely to be effective at what cost? In a close relationship, the value of compliance in further strengthening the relationship may outweigh

costs associated with these short-term favors. Women may perceive dishonesty as being costly in terms of relationship compliance more than men do. Seniors may perceive that undiplomatic honesty is more costly than other students perceive. Therefore, a study which asked respondents to explain the advantages and disadvantages of various strategies would help to explain these differences.

Second, one would want to know whether reported strategies in hypothetical situations really reflect actual behavior. People may not always do what they say they would do in a particular situation. Therefore, research looking at the refusal strategies that people actually use in various situations is important to verify these findings about hypothetical situations.

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Table 1

Compliance and Refusal Strategies Reported

	Percentage	Frequency
Ignore	.9	1
Refuse with no reason	6 .9	8
Refuse with the truth	31.9	37
Refuse with an excuse	18.1	21
Refuse with a lie	1.7	2
Feign compliance	.9	1
Bargain or compromise	6.9	8
Comply	17.2	20
Other refusal strategy	9.5	11
Uncodable response	6.0	7

Table 2

Percentages of Men and Women Reporting Each Refusal Strategy

	Percentage (Number)	
	Men	Women
Refuse with no reason	6.9 (2)	10.0 (6)
Refuse with the truth	20.7 (6)	51.7 (31)
Refuse with an excuse	24.1 (7)	23.3 (14)
Bargain or compromise	10.3 (3)	8.3 (5)
Other	37.9 (11)	6.7 (4)

Table 3

Percentages of Each Student Class Reporting Each Refusal Strategy

	Percentage (Number)			
	Freshmen	Sophomores	Juniors	Seniors
Refuse with no reason	14.3 (1)	28.6 (6)	2.8 (1)	0
Refuse with the truth	28.8 (8)	42.9 (9)	41.7 (15)	41.7 (10)
Refuse with an excuse	0	14.3 (3)	25.0 (9)	37.5 (9)
Bargain or compromise	14.3 (1)	0	11.1 (4)	12.5 (3)
Other	42.8 (3)	14.3 (3)	19.4 (7)	8.3 (2)